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## My Unknown Forefathers

I am here because I am a Mexican writer interested in the Arab culture and, more precisely, in the poetry of al-Muttanabbi. This very keen interest of mine has been perceived as odd in Mexico: a quaint little hobby (a tad eccentric too, the result, maybe, of reading too much or of taking strange courses during my college years). But it is, at least for me, natural just because I speak Spanish, that beautiful language brought to America by the Spanish conquerors.

My country, Mexico, its culture and very problematic identity are the result of an extraordinary and dramatic historic event: the Conquest. That is, the almost complete destruction of the ancient Aztec Empire and of its capital city, the great Tenochtitlán. In the year of 1519, the Spanish captain Hernán Cortés decided to take by force the neuralgic center of this portentous empire. When he arrived at the gates, however, the gates were opened to his army without a single skirmish. Why? Because, in one of history's ironic turns, the wise men of Moctezuma's court had predicted the arrival of white, bearded men. Demigods, avatars of Lord Quetzalcoátl, and benevolent. Neither the prophecy nor the solemn welcome were considered when the Spanish army decided, nonetheless, to obliterate the city by blood and fire.

The Aztec people fought valiantly against the worst odds of all, thinking they were facing gods bent on destroying them. The rest is history. The history of my country.

In elementary school, Mexican children are taught that at least four thousand words of our language come from Arabic. Teachers taught us that these words come from a language of astonishing expressive power. We learned then that the names of many flowers: *azahar*, *amapola*, *jasmín*; trades, *albañil*, perfumes, food, and that color full of poetic meaning in Spanish, *azul* – blue, come from the Arabs.

Later, I bumped painfully into algebra. And on the cover of my thick algebra book – the *Baldor*, the most popular math syllabus among Mexican students – there was the bearded and turbaned face of

al-Juarismi. It was a surprise: those mysterious Arabs that bestowed on us the four thousand words also discovered algebra, among many other things. To name them is maybe pointless, but for a girl of fifteen whose interest was suddenly piqued, the long list of scientific, philosophical and artistic feats was mesmerizing.

Those Arabs live in the everyday Mexican speech, in the popular sayings and proverbs – *Zutano o Fulano; De la Ceca a la Meca; el oro y el moro; mira si hay moros en la costa; no veas moros con tranchete; olé, ojalá [...]* – and in the subtleties of poetry. And there was even more: we were told then, and were intrigued by this, that before the Conquest there was another phenomenon of this sort. The Reconquest. It happened in Spain, and the main characters in this event were the Spanish Arabs and the Catholic Kings, the same two-some responsible of financing Christopher Columbus' trip to the East, and therefore to America. A Reconquest before the Conquest? How come?

And guess what ... those Arabs of Spain stayed in the Peninsula roughly eight centuries. Almost twice the time the Spanish stayed in Mexico. So the unavoidable and sometimes problematic relationship between Mexico and Spain grew a branch of deep interest, the Arab culture.

Then, more delightful evidence of the true extent of this relationship, this proximity with the Arabs, appeared everywhere, but maybe the most spectacular I found is the delightful scheme in the plot of *Don Quixote*, the novel that creates the genre, that living jewel of the Spanish literature. It has to do with Cide Hamete Benengeli, the Arab scholar and historian that wrote, according to this game, the stories of *Don Quixote*. Under that guise hides Miguel de Cervantes, just like under the layers of time hides the Arab world that once existed in Spain. From the beginning of the novel till the last page, the novelist Miguel de Cervantes poses as the Spanish commentator and editor of the writings of the Arab scholar Benengeli.

A few years after realizing this, I read my first adult version of *The Arabian Nights* in a wonderful translation by Rafael Cansinos Asséns. Of course, like any child anywhere, I was already enchanted by the stories of Aladdin and Simbad. As an adult, I was astonished by the narrative's cunning and subtleties in *The Arabian Nights*; I found it full of life, enriching and joyful. Of course the teachings of a writer

as generous as Jorge Luis Borges, the most famous admirer of *The Arabian Nights*, and maybe my favorite contemporary writer in Latin America, created many possibilities. He wrote hundreds of pages devoted to the Arabs and taught the writers of Latin America that any tradition we love can be adopted and that, if we wished, we could write about other cultures. This, as Borges found, is hard because there are some picturesque things expected from us Latin Americans. North Americans, and some Europeans, find it very strange and a little disquieting when a writer of Latin American origin does not dwell on certain topics. A novelist from my country, sadly, is expected to write only rural novels, portraying the harsh realities of the Mexican countryside (which, by the way, continue to be as harsh as ever).

Or, being a woman, one should write about machismo and women. (Men in Mexico are as macho as ever, too, and sometimes worse, and the awful killings of women on the border and the shameful attitude of our government should convince anyone harboring doubts about this). The great Mexican novelist Juan Rulfo has written the most powerful novel situated in the post-revolutionary Mexico, *Pedro Páramo*, a story laced with his somber and dark brand of magic realism so different from the magic realism of the wonderful writer Gabriel García Márquez, but just as beautiful.

I am afraid that it is impossible to even attempt to get any better than that. But anyway, now one is supposed to write a mish-mash of narco-crime-political novels, or magic-realism-Indian-woman-empowerment novels. But writers not only write about things that should be denounced or that portray their culture. Once I even began to write a paper entitled "Egypt and Mexico: a lot more than just pyramids". I wanted to write about Naguib Mahfouz and how the adaptation of one of his novels into a Mexican movie was done smoothly, how in his novel and in the movie not once camels or donkeys, those ubiquitous symbols of Egypt or Mexico, appear.

Novelists write about things that they like, and taste is the most intimate of mysteries: it is true, runs deep, and can't be explained. And I love al-Muttanabbi and the pre-Islamic poets, even if the context of their work is so far from mine. And I love Arab architecture, have spent many a happy day listening to Om Khalsoum, and I love many contemporary Arab novelists.

Why? What's the point in trying to answer this? It is powerful art, and for me that is enough. I have not, at least that I know of, a single Lebanese or Syrian blood relative, even if there are thousands of people of Arab descent in Mexico. But no, I do not have any, not even an in-law. I have duly – and happily, really – read Edward Said's *Orientalism* and did not only find it true, but relevant in a very surprising way for any Latin American. And in those intense college years I also read *La invención de América* by Edmundo O'Gorman, a book that parallels and precedes *Orientalism*. Doctor O'Gorman, one of our best historians, lucidly analyses how the Conquest and the colonization of America consolidated in Europeans a notion of natural superiority that even now gravitates over decisions and attitudes that have to do with immigration, refugees, social and political problems. Latin Americans and Arabs share some of those problems, but I don't think we, as societies, are very similar. The ways in which we are similar, I must say, is the way we are misinterpreted. Islam and the Arab world are perceived in the U.S.A. and some parts of Europe as a monolithic world. So is Latin America. It does not matter if the things we share are as important as the differences – imagine an ignorance so vast that it perceives a world that encompasses a whole continent, in the case of Latin America, as one country! For them, incredibly, Brazil and Cuba are the same, or Colombia and Mexico, or Chile and Argentina. That provincial and bigoted idea, sadly, is very pervasive in the U.S.A. We, from the Rio Bravo to Patagonia, are all the same. We are supposed to have picturesque manners, a perverse tendency to laziness and are, naturally, heirs of glorious and mysterious pasts with secrets hidden in the fog of millennia. Naturally we, Hispanics, that strange term, are now very backward. I have spoken to people in the States and Canada that have called me, to my surprise, articulate. Once, working out on the treadmill of the gym, someplace in Canada, a woman asked me with a sympathetic smile if "living among so many donkeys was hard". Mercifully, I was so astonished I couldn't answer. But this is something that happens all the time, even among friends. A very dear Spanish friend of mine called me "Aztec" once, and that surprised me because my family's Indian roots are firmly placed in Yucatán, where no Aztec ever dwelled. If anything, I am a *mestiza* with a Mayan side.

Such ignorance, and in the case of North Americans, such rampant bigotry, is very dangerous. Concerning the Arab world, the ignorance

of the North Americans allowed the monstrous propaganda of the Bush administration to go unchallenged by the voters. For them Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Algeria, Morocco, the list could go on and on, are all the same. But I have to retrace my steps, because I was explaining an impact of an esthetic nature, an impact so deep that it shaped the story of my first novel and of many of the things I read and write. The careful reading of the Borgesian short story *La busca de Averroes*, with its historical implications, fueled my resolve to write something that paid homage to the Arabs and the linguistic heritage that enriched the Spanish I speak. I read Miguel Assín Palacios, *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*, and thankfully discovered an intelligence that has been a beacon for me throughout these years in the books of Don Emilio García Gómez. I also read avidly Adonis and Barbara Pinckeny Stetkevych. Every open door led to more doors, and a few years later I was immersed in a literary universe so complex that I feel I just have begun looking around. The sheer terror of reading the poetry of Tabbata Xarran, the bandit-poet of pre-Islamic times, equals the first reading of Lautréamont. That is why I chose the form of fable for my first novel and used many words that in some way flaunted their Arab origin.

I also tried to divide the story in the three parts that compose the *qasidas*. So that is why, as in the *nasib*, there is a lengthy description of the little village where Auliya, the main character, is born. And she walks through the desert, and there is a *rahil*, then she goes back to the tribe, and in the epilogue I tried to write a *madhi*. This is not explicit. This was a scheme for myself and for anyone that likes Arab poetry. The fate of the novel has been a fortunate one. It has been translated, to my very great surprise and gratitude, and has editions in other countries. I took many liberties, mixing landscapes, legends and customs, but it is an Arab novel, I think. It has proven Borges right. It is a legitimate love letter to those four thousand beautiful words, and the joy of life that those words convey in Spanish. If the novel has any worth, this surely has its origins in the strong desire that I had while writing it: I wanted to pay homage to my unknown forefathers.